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STANDARDIZED COMMUNES IN COMMUNIST CHINA

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STANDARDIZED COMMUNES IN COMMUNIST CHINA

[The following is a translation of an article by Toi Sho as which appeared in Toho Hangetsukan (Eastern Semi-monthly), No 2, 16 January 1960, pp 30-35.]

Introduction

The People's Communes were reorganized internally three times between August 1958 and August 1959. They have changed considerably as policies toward them have become less abstract and ideal and more concrete and practical. This change has been variously criticized from within as well as from without as retrogressive or as empty words. It cannot be denied, however, that the commune is now standardized and that it has a clear identity of its own.

This process of communal standardizing has also been a process of criticism against or rectification of both egalitarianism and collectivism. The ideal form of the commune is that which provides a high degree of equal distribution of goods and of collectivization of the means of production. Thus, it is that which provides more substantive guarantees for the promotion of livelihood and the development of production. The promotion of livelihood and development of production, however, are not necessarily correlated. Also, while there are advantages in the pursuit of both egalitarianism and collectivism, there are undoubtedly disadvantages as well. For China in particular where productivity is still low, there is a great disparity between the promotion of livelihood and the development of production, and there are more disadvantages than advantages in the pursuit of the above line of national policies. These weaknesses naturally have generated criticisms against both egalitarianism and collectivism.

As shown by the Soviet Union's experiences with egalitarianism, it is clear that egalitarianism when abused would not attain the greater productivity desired because of discontent among the working sectors of the population. Naturally, therefore, there have been criticisms and warnings against egalitarianism despite urgings for selfless devotion

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for national cooperation and despite appeals for the elevation of the spirit of communism for its accomplishment.

On the other hand, inasmuch as collectivism is the natural outcome of rapid socialization movements, it has been generally encouraged. Within this environment not only is any criticism against it difficult, but also any suggestion for change proves politically unwise. Needless to say, this is why criticisms against collectivism have been delayed as compared with those against egalitarianism. The way egalitarianism has been proceeding in China is not "to receive according to the need," but "to receive according to the amount of labor." Furthermore, even though "supply of goods" is the very system for implementing egalitarianism on the principle of "to receive according to the need," this egalitarian function of supply has never been implemented. With regard to the collectivization of ownership, however, the commune has not only been regarded from the beginning as the owner of the means of production and goods produced but the extent of its ownership seems also to have been broadening.

Nonetheless, this collectivism has not sufficiently shown its effectiveness because of poor leadership and economic weaknesses in the commune. Instead, its inherent disadvantages have been increasing. As a measure to correct its evident ineffectiveness, a two-step process of decentralization has been undertaken. This in the end meant dissolution of the historically novel social unit wherein political and social functions were united. The commune has functioned both as a unit of production and as part of the government's administrative structure. Now it is redivided into two separate units, production and administration.

Diversification of Ownership by Communes

Let us talk in this section about criticisms that have been made against collectivism, and corrective measures that have been taken. Specifically, this section will analyze decentralization of ownership by the commune and the dissolution of the unity of government and commune.

Following the decision of the party's polit bureau (the Peitaiho decision) in August, 1958, the commune held the ownership of all means of production such as land, domesticated animals, farm tools and handicraft machinery. Naturally then, the commune owned all that was produced therewith and made allotments to each of its members. In some cases, furthermore, efforts were made to extend collectivization of ownership beyond the above level. In essence, this was to unite the communes of several villages and to constitute a joint hsien commune. The commune in each village

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was to give a portion of its products to this joint hsien commune and the joint hsien commune was to work on various public projects not limited to a single village but extended to all the villages in the hsien. Though this is far from a complete description, it should show the extent of ownership that is highly collectivized. A further development along this line were great communes to operate throughout the county. This was almost nationalization itself. This is an extreme case of collectivization of ownership.

This high degree of collectivization of ownership would by no means result in guaranteed further growth of productivity. Even the collectivization of ownership at the level of the single commune has never been easy. This difficulty was responsible for setting up the system of communal ownership of the means of production and goods wherein large collective ownership was decentralized and instead the present production corps ownership system was instituted = a small group ownership system. This production corps is almost the same as the "kolkhoz" (advanced agricultural producers cooperative; the commune was composed of several tens of such cooperatives) that existed before the formation of the commune. This suggests that the former ownership system has been reinstated.

Formerly, the "kolkhoz" owned domesticated animals, farm tools, and land (vegetable gardens and residences were left to individuals). There were several tens of "kolkhoz" in a village, and these "kolkhoz" were unified in a commune. The commune, therefore, owned domesticated animals, farm tools, handicraft machinery and land, moreover, the individual was denied ownership of vegetable gardens and residences.

This high degree of collectivization has of course achieved fluidity of capital and labor forces and to that extent it has helped develop production. Nonetheless, if there were no leadership and economic power within the commune to manage this high degree of collectivization, collectivization would invite confusion and produce many disadvantages harmful to production. Insofar as the commune owns all the means of production and goods produced, it has great responsibility for guaranteeing the capital and labor force needed in production effort within the commune and in further guaranteeing livelihood to several thousand agricultural families, and others engaged in various production and administrative tasks.

Can the commune fulfill its responsibilities with its present status of leadership and economic power? Needless to say, the task is one that is impossible for the commune. For, even the State itself at present is in no

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position to guarantee agricultural production, distribution and livelihood. More concretely, has the State offered to agriculture the same type of guarantee for production, distribution and livelihood as it has to industries owned by it? It has never assumed that kind of guarantee. It is in no position to do so. If without regard to the need for leadership and economic capability, the commune type of collectivization were enforced with too much emphasis placed on the system of organization, leaders would be ceaselessly overworked. This situation might also result in inflexibility and bureaucraticism and thus in distrust of the cadres by commune members and consequent discord between the two groups. As for commune members, they would be put to work with no clear responsibility in the name of mass mobilization. Or, with expansion in the scope of management, the responsibility of each member might be obscured. All these factors would result in their reluctance to participate actively in the work. If there were sufficiency in farm machinery and chemical fertilizers and if there were no shortage of daily necessities for the farmers, problems resulting from lack of leadership and economic capability might still be solved. If this were not the case and if young leaders who had merely finished an intensive training program had to do everything, they could by no means carry out all the responsibilities placed by the commune solely on their shoulder.

The failure to fulfill responsibilities resulted because the commune carried out collectivization excessively and expanded the scope of its responsibility too far. To eliminate disadvantages incurred in the implementation of collectivization, therefore, it was necessary to decentralize. This decentralization was to transfer to other organs responsibilities inherent in the commune. This process, however, is not so easy as to be fulfilled by the mere transfer of responsibilities. In order to decentralize responsibilities by transferring them elsewhere, some accompanying protective arrangements are requisite. These protective arrangements mean in the long run the transfer of the ownership of the means of production and goods produced as well. In other words, the commune returns its ownership of the means of production and goods produced to the former owners, the production corps of "kolkhoz."

This process of decentralization and transfer of ownership by the commune has been already proceeding through the 3-level ownership system: (1) Ownership of the means of production and goods produced was transferred to production corps that were to determine the tax allocation, production costs, savings and payments of members. (2) As a result, the commune would be deprived of land, production

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tools, domesticated animals and goods produced. Its function, therefore, would be limited to collection of revenues from the production corps. The revenue is used for the standardization of differences in ownership among the production corps. It is also used for public projects that cover the entire area of the commune. There are some cases where the commune owns its own factories, but in all cases ownership by the commune is now very limited. (3) Within a production corps, there are several production sub-groups. These production sub-groups do not possess either land, domesticated animals, farm tools or goods produced therewith. However, if they produce beyond their respective production goals or if they produce at a cost lower than the standardized cost, they are entitled to own the difference which is either distributed to all of its members or used for the group as a whole. This type of ownership is also very limited.

Of course, the Peking government does not consider as a retrogression the replacement of the commune by the 3-levels ownership system -- under which an absolute portion of ownership by the commune is returned to the former kolkhoz. [According to the Peking government], only rightist opportunists would consider it a retrogression. It is argued that the commune's revenues, collected from the production corps, are used for the commune as a whole, and that the commune's investment of its revenues constitute its means of production and is accumulative. Besides, the State may in the future invest capital in the commune. Thus, gradually the commune would be transformed into a great collective owner from its small collective owner status. This future possibility [the Peking government argues], is of great significance. Regardless of the future, however, what is true today is that an ownership system of great collectives has been changed to a small collective ownership system. In short, until now objective conditions have been overlooked while subjective estimates of capability have played too great a role.

Dissolution of the Unity of Government and Commune

What was most distinctive about the people's commune is that it was a basic production unit and at the same time constituted an administrative unit of the government. Even in the Soviet Union, this unity has not been and is not realized. The "kolkhoz" in the Soviet Union is similar to that in Communist China, and is merely an organizational unit for production -- primarily for agricultural production. It does not have anything to do with governmental administration.

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The people's commune was in general organized by village--one people's commune to each village, with the village head at the same time head of the commune. In other words, all means of production and goods produced in the village were "owned by the village." It is not surprising, therefore, that the village, an administrative organ, became also an organizational unit of production. This unit of production and administration was planned to combine production and leadership and thus to help carry out more systematically production, distribution and consumption. From this point of view, the people's commune may to some extent have been an ideal social structure. Furthermore, as long as the means of production and goods produced were all owned by the village, this unified system seemed to be logically imperative.

Nonetheless, if one puts these theoretical arguments aside, there is some question as to whether or not this system would be practicable. Inasmuch as this unity of government and commune resulted from collectivism, it, as was the case with collectives, must have sound leadership and economic power. We may recall collectives, because they lacked these two qualifications, were compelled to undergo adjustment and to redistribute their collectivized ownership. The unity of government and commune, which was the collective's premature offspring, therefore had naturally to be disbanded. It is nothing but perversion of the facts to insist that there still remains the unity of government and commune, despite the 3-level ownership system that was clearly set up to redistribute ownership. Communist China, however, has not come out with a statement concerning the dissolution of this unity. On the contrary, Communist China maintains that it has been further strengthened.

The way we look at it, there is a difference between a statement that the unity of government and commune has been strengthened and that the State's administrative authorities have been strengthened. At present, Communist China means the latter.

During the "kolkhoz" period prior to the appearance of the commune (before the summer of '58), the administrative authorities of the village were extremely weak. Thereafter, following the emergence of the commune, "kolhосу" it would be more correct to say that the "kolkhoz" were absorbed by the village rather than vice versa. The strength of the administrative authorities of the village, as a consequence of this collectivization, were greatly enhanced. It might have been excessively enhanced. This does not mean, however, that leadership has also been enhanced. The village (the commune), as earlier stated, was not able to guarantee

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production, distribution and consumption and to efficiently manage all the kolkhoz in the village. Consequently, the village (the commune), not having been able to exercise administrative control over the most difficult fields of production and distribution, had to delegate [this control] to the kolkhoz production corps and was forced into the position of collecting its revenues in the form of taxes-in-kind on the goods produced by the production corps. This is a complete separation of the process of production and administration. Needless to say, the financial management of the commune and of the production corps became completely independent of each other. Thus, for instance, the designation of People's Commune Production Corps No. 1, in Hsien A, means the same as Hsien A, Village B, Production Corps No. 1. It would not be an oversimplification to state that in essence it is merely in name that the word village was substituted for the word commune.

Furthermore, problems concerning commercial activities by the commune should not be overlooked here. After the commune was established supply and marketing cooperatives and credit cooperatives were absorbed by the commune and they came to constitute the main commune marketing bureau or credit bureau. This Marketing Bureau was then placed under the jurisdiction of the commune, but at the same time it was also placed under the jurisdiction of the State through the hsien. Its financial arrangement was also independent from the commune. Although it paid part of its profit to the commune as taxes, most of the profit was paid directly to the State. The State's financial aid to the commune came from these taxes. In addition, the Communist Party itself denied "the unity of party and commune", and the party on its own has maintained its direct relationship with the commune through the party's branch organizations in the communes and the commune's production corps. In this manner, the village (the commune), as earlier stated, had strengthened its administrative structure in the form of the unity of government and commune. With the present dissolution of this unity, it might be conjectured that the administrative structure of the village (the commune) has been weakened, but in comparison with that during the "kolkhoz" period, it exhibits an even greater increase in power. This increase in the [strength of] administrative authorities of the village does not necessarily mean that the unity of government and commune has been furthered. As already stated, it has been dissolved. This unification, a product of the institution of the communes, was dissolved, however, only after the administrative authorities of the village (the commune) had been strengthened. Therefore, in the long run, there are some

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cases where the commune was merely a means of strengthening the administrative power of the village.

All this shows that this new creation of the people's commune, which was structurally far in advance of any similar arrangement in the Soviet Union, has now been cut back to the level of the Soviet Union through a process of decentralization of ownership and dissolution of the unity of government and commune. This withdrawal occurred in the course of turning ideals into practice and represents the reinstitution of the system that is most contributory to production. There could have been no other alternatives.

END

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